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AUTHOR	Lashway, Larry
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ABSTRACT

Standards-based reform and the demand for accountability and higher student achievement over the past decade have created challenges for school boards. Should boards continue their historical low-key, hands-off approach to student learning? Or should they take on a leadership role by capitalizing on their traditional responsibility as local policymakers? This ERIC Digest describes the nature and potential of such policymaking efforts. Based on a review of research, the digest concludes that there is little empirical evidence to show how board policy affects student learning. Much of the literature consists of policy recommendations and opinions. However, the research suggests that boards can be a key part of educational improvement in a number of ways. Boards can support reform by mobilizing public support, providing adequate resources, and hiring qualified superintendents. Board members can establish policy committing themselves to systematic strategic planning based on assessment data. Boards can establish goals that all students will receive instruction from fully certified teachers. Board members can be aware of and begin to act on the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act. Boards can view coordinating board policy to support student learning as a best practice. (Contains 11 references.) (WFA)

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Larry Lashway

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Using School Board Policy To Improve Student Achievement

By Larry Lashway

Whatever controversies the accountability movement has generated, a decade of standards-based reform has created consensus on at least one point: Student achievement is the ultimate measure of educational value. Teachers, administrators, and policymakers now routinely preface their action plans with the reminder that success is defined in terms of what students learn.

For school boards, this mandate presents some challenging questions. In the current reform model, standards are set at the state level and translated into instruction at the school level, leaving an ill-defined mediating role for the district. Moreover, boards have historically taken a low-key, hands-off approach to student learning, reasoning that instructional decisions should be made by professional educators. How can they reconcile this longstanding practice with the demand for aggressive leadership to improve student learning?

Some critics have answered that question pessimistically, concluding that boards are not up to the challenge and should be replaced by other forms of governance. However, some board leaders have begun to stake out a leadership role by capitalizing on their traditional responsibility as local policymakers. This *Digest* describes the nature and potential of those efforts.

Can Boards Influence Student Achievement?

Although the current accountability movement has not prescribed a robust role for local districts, Richard Elmore (1993) notes they can provide checks and balances to the state and federal actions, adapt state reforms to local conditions, mobilize local support, and serve as a source of creativity and innovation.

Elmore's review of research found uneven district performance. He concluded that districts did not typically coordinate policies to influence what happened in the classroom; their efforts were "scattered, piecemeal, and, for the most part, weak in influencing teaching." Nonetheless, he was able to cite studies suggesting that active district involvement could stimulate reform activity at the school level.

When Maria McCarthy and Mary Beth Celio (2001) interviewed educators in Washington schools that had failed to make progress on state standards, they found that district-level passivity was a common theme. Principals and teachers felt "little performance pressure," and boards seemed disengaged.

More positively, a study commissioned by the Iowa Association of School Boards (2001) found that certain board attitudes and behaviors were correlated with student achievement. Board members in high-achieving districts believed that all students had the capacity to achieve, whereas their counterparts in low-achieving districts tended to accept student limitations as unchangeable. Boards in high-achieving districts were knowledgeable about key reform elements such as shared leadership, continuous improvement, staff development, and data-based decision-making, and both they and the professional staff could provide specific examples of how those concepts were being applied in their districts. Conversely, the study found that when the board was not focused on school renewal, teachers and administrators were equally diffident.

Although the study was based on a very small sample (six schools) and does not lead to the conclusion that board action *caused* improved achievement, it does suggest that board actions are a key part of a "culture of improvement."

What Is the Board's Policy Role?

Boards can support reform in a number of ways, such as mobilizing public support, providing adequate resources, and hiring qualified superintendents. But recent discussion has focused on re-energizing the board's traditional policy-setting role.

Most board members and administrators readily accept the axiom that "the board sets policy, the superintendent implements policy." But consistent application of this principle has never been easy. Several studies have found that boards actually spend only a small part of their meeting time on policies (Deborah Land 2002), while some school board associations have conceded that board policymaking is too often reactive rather than proactive (Illinois Association of School Boards and others 1998).

John Carver (2000) has called attention to "the ironic combination of micromanagement *and* rubber stamping." That is, boards not only infringe on administrative prerogatives, they abdicate their legitimate policy-setting role to superintendents.

The best-known model of systematic policy governance is built on the assumption that boards do not exist to run schools but to govern those who do run the schools (Carver and Carver 1997, Carver 2000). In this corporate model, boards have operational responsibility only for their own activities, such as setting agendas and running meetings. Beyond that, they govern by developing policies that specify desired ends and determine acceptable means of reaching those goals.

Carver recommends that the means be stated as "executive limitations." That is, the board identifies any methods or behaviors that are unacceptable. Within those boundaries, superintendents are free to take whatever steps seem advisable to reach the desired ends, without further permission from the board.

Once policies are established, boards confine themselves to evaluating the superintendent's performance in light of the policy. The board holds the superintendent accountable by asking only two questions: Were the ends achieved? and Were any procedural limits violated? This "define-and-demand" control replaces the more typical "poke-and-probe" style in which boards continually assign new tasks or set new expectations for the CEO.

How Can Boards Use Policies To Affect Student Learning?

Given a systematic approach to policy development, how can boards use their authority to have a positive impact on student learning?

In the publication *Targeting Student Learning* (Illinois Association of School Boards) several state school board associations note that policies can serve a number of purposes. Some will simply fulfill pass-along mandates originating at the state or

federal level. For example, state law may require districts to have a written policy governing student privacy.

The National School Boards Association emphasizes the importance of *alignment* (A. Bruce McKay and Joanne P. Newcomb 2002). Holding the ultimate accountability for results, boards should take a systems approach that ensures consistency among goals, plans, resources, capacity, incentives, and assessment. Policy is a key tool in ensuring alignment.

More dynamically, policies let boards communicate their priorities and expectations, sending a clear signal to staff, parents, and community about the district's goals and values. To some extent, the fact that a board *has* policies on student learning (irrespective of their content) will have a positive impact by demonstrating to the local educational community that student learning is a priority.

Policies to support student achievement are not restricted to curriculum and instruction. The authors of *Targeting Student Learning* have identified eight broad policy areas that can support student learning: board governance, academic standards and assessment, education program, curriculum, instruction, learning environment, professional standards, and parent/community engagement. For example, board members can establish a policy committing themselves to systematic strategic planning based on assessment data. Or, they can establish a goal that all students will receive instruction from fully certified teachers.

What Policy Issues Are Raised by 'No Child Left Behind'?

Policy experts usually encourage boards to be proactive in establishing policies designed to meet the unique needs of their schools and community. However, the sweeping provisions of the recent No Child Left Behind Act will inevitably put boards in a reactive mode.

The National School Boards Association (2002) has identified a number of issues in the law that may benefit from carefully thought out policies, including assessment, student discipline and safety, employment and hiring, employee liability, Limited English Proficient students, Title I schools, homeless students, religion in schools, community access to school facilities, military access to students, student privacy, and sex education. Within these categories, NSBA has identified some forty-five specific concerns.

Many of these issues can be addressed in a straightforward way, but others are likely to create difficult dilemmas. For example, the law gives parents with children in failing schools the right to transfer, and insufficient space will not be a valid reason for turning down those requests. Thus, current district policies on school assignment are likely to need a major overhaul.

Similarly, the law sets stringent requirements for teacher qualifications that are likely to force revisions in hiring and staffing practices. Existing policies governing teacher transfers may be superceded by the requirement that low-performing schools get an equitable share of highly qualified teachers.

No Child Left Behind not only mandates sweeping changes in longstanding practices, it does so with great speed. With no time for a phase-in, boards can expect to be plunged into a tumultuous environment, and a careful approach to policy will be crucial.

Does School Board Policy Make a Difference in Student Achievement?

The idea of coordinating board policy to support student learning is a plausible reform strategy that seems to mesh well with traditional board roles. But some scholars are skeptical, pointing out that recent governance trends have shifted power from the local level to states and the federal government (David Conley, in press). Boards now find their authority squeezed by state and federal mandates that dictate learning goals and restrict operational flexibility. Conley has concluded that boards "are not the drivers of improvement-related policies, nor do they or will they operate with broad discretion to determine which policies will be used to improve their schools."

Some commentators have also claimed that governing by policy is not as easy as Carver's model suggests. William Price (2001) argues that a clear role separation may not be realistic. Board members are frequently under heavy political pressure to intervene in management decisions, and superintendents are increasingly being trained as leaders rather than managers. Price suggests that boards and superintendents may have to engage in a continual negotiation over who is responsible for what.

Unfortunately, there is little empirical evidence on how board policy affects student learning (Land; Conley). Much of the available literature consists of policy recommendations and opinion rather than empirical research. Answers may be slow in coming because of the multitude of variables that have to be untangled. By their nature, boards do not create learning; rather, they work through others by creating conditions that promote learning (Iowa Association of School Boards).

Thus, as boards gear up for a suddenly intensified reform environment, they can view coordinating board policy to support student learning as a "best practice." Thoughtful, systematic policymaking is not a guaranteed recipe for successful school renewal, but it is associated with success.

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